

Department of Mental Health

Mississippi State Hospital Forensic Service

Why is Mississippi State Hospital requesting a new Forensic Services facility?

MSH has requested in its capital improvement plan submitted to the Department of Finance and Administration a new 60 bed Forensic Services facility. The new facility is needed because the current 35 bed facility, which was built in 1955, does not provide the required level of security and safety and does not meet the standards of the National Fire Protection Association Life Safety Codes. The proposed Forensic Services facility construction project includes planning costs of approximately \$400,000 and construction costs of approximately \$17 million.

The relatively small bed capacity of the current Forensic Services facility is also a significant factor contributing to delays in conducting evaluations of defendants throughout the state.

What is Forensic Services?

MSH is the only state-operated program that provides forensic mental health services in the state. Forensic Services provides pre-trial evaluations and treatment for criminal defendants from Circuit Courts in all 82 Mississippi counties.

The bed capacity of the Forensic Services facility is 35 beds. Of those, 15 beds are dedicated for inpatient evaluation, treatment, and competency restoration of pre-trial Circuit Court defendants. The remaining 20 beds are for the treatment of individuals who have been found Not Guilty by

Reason of Insanity or who must be treated on the unit due to specific safety or security concerns.

Forensic Services is currently staffed with one forensic psychiatrist and one psychologist qualified to perform forensic evaluations. MSH also utilizes three forensic psychologists who perform community-based screening forensic evaluations on a contractual basis. However, any party may contract with any mental health provider of their choice in order to receive a forensic evaluation.

How are evaluations scheduled?

Before an evaluation can be scheduled, MSH Forensic Services issues a request for information and documentation necessary for the evaluation, such as prior psychiatric history, medical history, or other legal documentation. These requests for information are now issued to both the defense and prosecution counsel, regardless of which party requested the evaluation.

What causes delays in completing the evaluations?

There are three significant factors which contribute to delays in completing evaluations:

- 1) It is not uncommon for there to be significant delays in MSH receiving the necessary information from the parties seeking the evaluation.
- 2) The limited number of beds available for individuals who need inpatient observation and treatment to complete forensic

evaluations and to provide the requested expert opinions.

- 3) The limited number of psychologists and psychiatrists employed by MSH who are trained and credentialed to perform forensic evaluations.

If the requested documentation has been provided, the court order contains the necessary language, and a case is otherwise ready for evaluation, cases can still incur a delay while the defendants await available bed space. Generally, once all requested information is received and reviewed and there is an available bed, evaluations are scheduled within a matter of weeks.

The replacement and expansion of the Forensic Services facility from a 35 bed unit to a 60 bed unit would provide the improvements needed in the safety and security of the environment of care of the forensic service and will decrease the time pre-trial defendants wait for a forensic evaluation.

For more information, contact MSH Director James Chastain at 601-351-8084.

